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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the reasons why media violence research is often misunderstood. First, it explains the methodological limitations of studying media violence and argues that these limitations are similar to those accepted in medical research. Second, it explores the role of emotional response that media violence can produce and possible techniques for redirecting its harmful consequences. Two areas of emotional research are explored: (1) media violence affects on desensitization and hostility; and (2) its contributions to children's fears and anxieties. The paper cites studies that indicate exposure to intense media violence increases hostile feeling in the short-term and can produce an enduring hostile mental framework that affects interpersonal relationships. It also cites research demonstrating the widespread contribution of media violence to children's nightmares and the usefulness of cognitive development research in predicting what will frighten children. In conclusion it argues that knowledge of the emotional impact of media violence can be useful in designing strategies for combating the problem. A newly published study suggests that encouraging children to focus on feelings of the victim of violence can counteract the typical aggression impact of a violent cartoon. (Contains 28 references.) (Author/JDM)

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Media Violence and Children's Emotions: Beyond the "Smoking Gun"

Abstract

This paper focuses on two reasons why media violence research is often misunderstood. First, it explores the methodological limitations of studying media violence and argues that these limitations are similar to those we accept in medical research. It concludes that viewed in this perspective, the link between media violence and aggressive behavior has been conclusively demonstrated. Second, the paper explores the largely neglected role of emotional responses both in the harms that media violence can produce and in possible techniques for reducing the harmful consequences.

Two areas of emotional research are explored: Media violence's effects on desensitization and hostility, on the one hand, and its contribution to children's fears and anxieties on the other. The paper cites studies indicating that exposure to intense media violence increases hostile feelings in the short-term and can also produce an enduring hostile mental framework that colors even affectively neutral interpersonal interactions. It also cites research demonstrating the widespread contribution of media violence to children's nightmares and long-term anxieties and the usefulness of cognitive development research in predicting what will frighten children of different ages and in helping reduce media-induced fears.

Finally, the paper argues that a knowledge of the emotional impact of media violence can be useful in designing strategies for combating the problem: A newly published study demonstrates that encouraging children to focus on the feelings of the victim of violence can counteract the typical aggression-promoting impact of a violent cartoon.

Media Violence and Children's Emotions: Beyond the "Smoking Gun"

Research on media violence is often misunderstood by the general public. There are two important reasons why. One is a methodological issue: It is impossible to do the type of "smoking gun" research that would please the ardent skeptics. The other is that most public discussions of media violence don't adequately address the emotional consequences of viewing. I will briefly discuss the methodological issues and then focus on the important role of emotional reactions both in the risks of media violence and in potential remedies.

As for the methodological problems: We can't randomly assign children early in their lives to watch different doses of violence on television and then 20 years later see which children committed violent crimes. But the same type of limitation also exists for medical research: We can't randomly assign groups of people to smoke differing amounts of cigarettes for 20 years, and then count the number of people who developed cancer.

Tobacco researchers conduct correlational studies in which they look at the amount people smoked during their lives and then see the rate at which they have succumbed to cancer. They control statistically for other factors, of course -- other healthy and unhealthy behaviors that either reduce or promote the tendency to develop cancer. Then they can find out whether smoking contributed to cancer, over and above these other influences. And since they can't do cancer experiments on people, they use animal studies. These are artificial, but they tell us something about the short-term effects of tobacco that can't be found from correlational studies. Putting the two types of research together, we now have powerful data about the effects of smoking on the development of cancer.

Similarly, media violence researchers do longitudinal studies of children's media exposure and look at the types of behaviors they engage in over time. We also control for other factors, such as previous aggressiveness, family problems, and the like. We don't look at media violence in a vacuum; we examine whether there is a correlation between television viewing and violent behavior, even controlling for other influences. We also do experiments. Like the animal experiments for cancer, these are not natural situations, but such experiments fill the gaps we cannot fill otherwise. They are meant to show short-term effects, like increases in hostility or more accepting attitudes toward violence -- changes that we know increase the likelihood of violent actions, both in the short term and in the long run.

As with tobacco, the two types of media research form a powerful picture. Even though there are many studies that can be criticized, there are many more others that are valid. A recent meta-analysis[1] putting all the studies together, makes a compelling case that media violence does contribute to anti-social behaviors, including violence.

It's also misguided to say the effects of media violence on violent behavior are trivial. To give an example, a recent national survey of Israeli middle-schools[2] showed that when World Wrestling Federation was introduced to Israeli TV in 1994, the widespread imitation of the wrestlers' behavior produced an epidemic of serious playground injuries. The mayhem continued until the frequency with which the program aired was reduced and educators offered extensive counseling to counteract the show's impact.

The second reason for misunderstanding media violence -- the failure to address emotional consequences -- is an area I have been investigating for more than 25 years. Two important areas of emotional effects are hostility and desensitization on the one hand, and fears and anxieties on the other.

Desensitization and Hostility

Desensitization is a psychological process by which an emotional response is repeatedly evoked in situations in which the action tendency that arises out of the emotion proves irrelevant. Desensitization is sometimes used to treat phobias, by gradually and repeatedly presenting a frightening stimulus under nonthreatening conditions. Over time, when desensitization works, the phobic response becomes less and less intense. In a somewhat analogous fashion, exposure to media violence, particularly that which entails bitter hostilities or the graphic display of injuries, initially induces an intense emotional reaction in viewers. Over time and with repeated exposure, however, many viewers exhibit decreasing emotional responses to the depiction of violence and injury. Desensitization to violence has been documented in a variety of outcomes. For example, it has been observed as reduced arousal and emotional disturbance while witnessing violence[3]; as greater hesitancy to call an adult to intervene in a witnessed physical altercation[4]; and as less sympathy for the victims of domestic abuse[5]. Few people would argue that any of these are healthy outcomes.

There is also ample evidence that viewing violence increases viewers' hostile feelings. Some people argue that the well-substantiated correlation between chronic hostility and violence viewing simply shows that people who are already hostile are more likely to choose violence. Well, it's true that violent, hostile people are more attracted to media violence[6], but research shows that the relationship is bi-directional. A 1992 field investigation[7] is a good illustration of this fact. Researchers went to a theater and asked moviegoers to fill out the Buss-Durkee hostility inventory either before or after they viewed a film that they themselves had selected. The findings showed that both the male and female viewers who had chosen a violent movie were initially more hostile than the viewers who had selected a nonviolent movie. Moreover, viewers' levels of hostility became even higher after viewing the violent movie, but remained at the same low level after viewing the nonviolent movie.

This study once again disproves the sometimes-popular notion of "catharsis," that violence viewing helps purge people of their hostile inclinations. To the contrary. And this increase in hostility is not necessarily short-lived. A 1999 experiment[8] looked at the emotional and interpersonal consequences of repeated exposure to gratuitous violence. Researchers randomly assigned both male and female college students to view either intensely violent or nonviolent feature films for four days in a row. On the fifth day, in a purportedly unrelated study, the participants were put in a position to help or hinder another person's chances of future employment. The surprising results indicated that both the men and the women who had received the recent daily dose of film violence were more harmful to that person's job prospects, whether she had treated them well or had behaved in an insulting fashion. The repeated violence viewing

apparently provided an *enduring hostile mental framework* that damaged interactions that were affectively neutral as well as those that involved provocation

The research I've presented on the impact of media violence on desensitization and hostility demonstrates that we should not limit ourselves to considering the most obvious, final outcomes of viewing violence, that is, behaving violently, when attempting to understand its harmful consequences.

Fear and Anxieties

There is growing evidence that violence viewing also induces intense fears and anxieties in child viewers. A 1998 survey[9] of more than 2,000 third through eighth graders in Ohio revealed that as the number of hours of television viewing per day increased, so did the prevalence of symptoms of psychological trauma, such as anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress. Similarly, a 1999 survey[10] of the parents of almost 500 children in kindergarten through fourth grade in Rhode Island revealed that the amount of children's television viewing (especially television viewing at bedtime) and having a television in their own bedroom, were significantly related to the frequency of sleep disturbances. Indeed, 9% of the parents surveyed reported that their child experienced TV-induced nightmares *at least once a week*. Finally a random national survey[11] conducted in 1999 reported that 62% of parents with children between the ages of two and seventeen said that their child had been frightened by something they saw in a TV program or movie.

Two recent studies of adults' retrospective reports[12],[13] of memories of having been frightened by a television show or movie demonstrate that the presence of vivid, detailed memories of enduring media-induced fear is nearly universal. Of the students reporting fright reactions in the study we conducted at the Universities of Wisconsin and Michigan, 52% reported disturbances in eating or sleeping, 22% reported mental preoccupation with the disturbing material, and 35% reported subsequently avoiding or dreading the situation depicted in the program or movie. Moreover, more than one-fourth of the respondents said that the emotional impact of the program or movie (viewed an average of six years earlier) was still with them at the time of reporting!

Studies like these and many anecdotal reports reveal that it is not at all unusual to give up swimming in the ocean after seeing *Jaws* -- in fact, a surprising number of people report giving up swimming altogether after seeing that movie. Many other people trace their long-term fears of specific animals, such as dogs, cats, or insects to childhood exposure to cartoon features like *Alice in Wonderland* or *Beauty and the Beast* or to horror movies[14]. I would like to note here that the impact of frightening media depictions are not *just* "psychological." As disturbing as unnecessary anxieties are by themselves, they can readily lead to physical ailments (especially when they disrupt sleep for long periods of time).

For the most part, what frightens children in the media involves violence or the perceived threat of violence or harm. It is important to note, however, that parents often find it hard to predict children's fright reactions to television and films because a child's level of cognitive development influences how he or she perceives and responds to media stimuli. My associates and I have conducted a program of research to explore developmental differences in media-induced fright reactions based on theories and findings in cognitive development. I have summarized this research and its implications for parents and others interested in children's mental health in my book *"Mommy, I'm Scared": How TV and Movies Frighten Children and What We Can Do to Protect Them.* This research shows that as children mature cognitively, some things become less likely to disturb them, whereas other things become potentially more upsetting.

As a first generalization, the importance of how things look decreases as a child's age increases. This finding is consistent with research showing that preschool children tend to sort and match stimuli based on perceptible characteristics, but as they mature through the elementary school years, this tendency becomes supplanted by the tendency to attend increasingly to the more conceptual aspects of stimuli. Both our experimental[15] and our survey[16] research supports the generalization that preschool children (approximately 3 to 5 years old) are more likely to be frightened by something that looks scary but is actually harmless than by something that looks attractive but is actually harmful; for older elementary school children (approximately 9 to 11 years), appearance carries much less weight, relative to the behavior or destructive potential of a character, animal, or object.

A second generalization from research is that as children mature, they become more responsive to realistic, and less responsive to fantastic dangers depicted in the media. This prediction is based on developmental trends in children's understanding of the fantasy-reality distinction. Our 1984 survey of parents[17] supported this trend. In general, parents' tendency to mention fantasy offerings, depicting events that could not possibly occur in the real world, as sources of their child's fear, decreased as the child's age increased, and the tendency to mention fictional offerings, depicting events that could possibly occur, increased. Further support for this generalization comes from our 1996 survey[18] of children's fright responses to television news. A random survey of parents of children in kindergarten through sixth grades showed that fear produced by fantasy programs decreased as the child's grade increased, while fear induced by news stories increased with age.

A third generalization is that as children mature, they become frightened by media depictions involving increasingly abstract concepts. Again, research in cognitive development shows that the ability to think abstractly increases throughout elementary school and continues to mature during the teenage years. Data supporting this generalization come from our 1986 survey[19] of children's responses to the made-for-television movie *The Day After.* Although many people were concerned about young children's reactions to this movie, which depicted the devastation of a Kansas community by a nuclear attack, the survey showed that the emotional impact of this movie increased as the viewer's age increased. Similarly, our survey[20] of children's reactions to television coverage of the war in the Persian Gulf showed that preschool and

elementary school children were more likely to be frightened by the concrete, visual aspects of the coverage (such as the missiles exploding), whereas teenagers were more disturbed by the abstract components of the story (such as the possibility of the conflict spreading).

Coping with Media Violence Effects

An understanding of emotional reactions to media is also important in developing ways to prevent or reduce the harm produced by media violence. Research in cognitive development has helped us discover effective ways to reassure children who have been frightened by media threats. These are explained in *Mommy, I'm Scared.* Strategies for coping with media-induced fears need to be tailored to the age of the child[21]. Up to the age of about seven, nonverbal coping strategies work the best[22]. These include removing children from the scary situation, distracting them, giving them attention and warmth, and desensitization[23]. Eight-year-olds and older can benefit from hearing logical explanations about why they are safe. If what they saw is fantasy, it helps children in this age group to be reminded that what they have seen could never happen.[24] If the program depicts frightening events that can possibly occur, however, it may help to give older children information about why what they have seen cannot happen to them[25] or to give them empowering instructions on how to prevent it from occurring.[26]

As for reducing the aggression-promoting effect of media violence, an understanding of emotional responses can be helpful in developing mediation strategies that can be used by parents or teachers. For example, as viewers become increasingly desensitized and more hostile, they become less and less likely to empathize with the victims of violence. One criticism of the way violence is usually portrayed on television is that it minimizes the apparent harmful consequences to the victim[27], both promoting desensitization and increasing the likelihood of the adoption of aggressive attitudes and behaviors.

A genre of media violence that typically trivializes the consequences to the victim is the classic cartoon, Woody Woodpecker, for example. In a study just published[28], we showed not only that watching Woody could increase boys' endorsement of aggressive solutions to problems, but that empathy instructions could intervene in this effect. Second- through sixth-grade boys were randomly assigned one of three groups: (1) a no-mediation group, who watched the cartoon without instructions; (2) a mediation group who were asked, before viewing, to keep in mind the feelings of the man in the cartoon (this was the tree-medic who was the target of Woody's attacks); and (3) a control group, who didn't see a cartoon. As is frequently found in such studies, the kids who had just seen the violent cartoon without instructions scored higher on pro-violence attitudes than the kids in the control condition (showing stronger agreement with statements like, "sometimes fighting is a good way to get what you want"). However, the kids who were asked to think about the victim's feelings showed no such increase in pro-violence attitudes. As a side-effect, this empathy-promoting intervention reduced the degree to which the children found the cartoon funny. An empathy-promoting intervention may have a dual benefit therefore: intervening in the direct effect of viewing and perhaps reducing future choices of similar fare.

More research is needed to explore other ways to intervene in the negative effects of media violence. Given the fact that media violence is such a profitable business, it is not likely to go away in the near future. However, a greater understanding of the emotional consequences of viewing violence will help policymakers, teachers, parents, and children deal with the problem. To my mind, we need better public education for parents and teachers, including better information about media effects, more useful content labels, and additional mediation strategies based on research findings. We also need media literacy education for children, including helping them place what they see in perspective, and encouraging a critical analysis of their own media choices.

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